

"A Statement" of the Forty-four:
The Dam Breaks Loose in Missouri

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We will also take pains, if either controversies already composed should be renewed, or new controversies concerning religion should arise, to remove and settle them betimes (without delay), for the purpose of avoiding offense, without long and dangerous digressions.

--Preface to the Book of Concord, 1580

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In tracing the history of Lutheranism in America the historian who operates with biblical categories will trace that history from the perspective of seeing how the Gospel cause, that is, the cause of Confessional Lutheranism, was advanced or suffered setback. As we trace this history and note its various chapters, trends and incidents we see that there are both good stories and bad stories to be told. The good stories are the accounts of the Gospel cause being advanced. They are the stories of those churches which fought for, attained, and are retaining a confessional Lutheran position in doctrine and practice. The bad stories have to do with churches that strove for a God-pleasing, scriptural and confessional position but never fully attained it, or once having attained it they were willing to compromise it and therefore lost it.

The story that is told on the following pages is one small chapter of one of the bad stories. The story is about the Missouri Synod, a church body which had attained a truly God-pleasing fellowship based on a scripturally sound confessional position and practice, but then lost that confessional treasure by failing to correct a trend toward doctrinal laxity and indifference which began to creep into the Synod in the first part of this century and grow ever so slowly at first. Because the trend was not recognized and corrected at the beginning, it began to grow and pick up momentum until, like a flood, nothing could stop it. The chapter in the story about Missouri which we are going to look at is "A Statement" of the Forty-four. We will trace the history of "A Statement," see what procedure was used to deal

with the men who signed "A Statement," analyze the significance of this procedure and then, hopefully, draw some pertinent conclusions which will serve for a later generation of Lutherans who still retain a fully confessional Lutheran position.

From the 1930's on there was a small but growing trend towards doctrinal laxity in the Missouri Synod. This laxity showed itself in a number of incidents, but the common element seemed to be one of a failure to stand up and be counted when action was called for. Already by the late 1920's and early 1930's problems were coming up in faculty meetings at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.¹ Discipline proceedings were begun with pastors who were publicly sympathetic with the old Iowa and Ohio (which had recently merged into the American Lutheran Church) positions on such issues as the Antichrist and Universal Justification. But the proceedings often were not carried through with proper discipline. By 1935 an official union movement was under way in Missouri to get closer with the newly formed ALC. The first round of discussions resulted in the "1938 Resolutions,"

¹A. T. Kretzmann tells the interesting story that while he was a seminary student at St. Louis (1927-1931) it was the custom of his uncle, Prof. P. E. Kretzmann to invite all his Kretzmann relatives who were students to his house for Wednesday evening suppers. Usually A. T. would find himself as the only guest at his uncle's table. The reason for that, A. T. says, is because his cousins (O. P., A. R., Karl) were theologically liberal and did not appreciate the theological fare which their uncle had to offer. The professor they liked to spend time with was W. G. Pollack because he had the same liberal leanings. One Wednesday evening P. E. was unusually late in coming home for supper. When he finally arrived he appeared somewhat disturbed and when asked what was wrong he stated that he had just come from a lengthy faculty meeting at which President Photenhauer had confronted the faculty with a number of issues. At the close of that meeting Photenhauer is reported by Kretzmann to have said that at that time there were only two members of the faculty who were in complete agreement with the Missouri Synod: Franz Pieper and P. E. Kretzmann. As told by A. T. Kretzmann, Personal Interview at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library, April 2, 1981.

which placed Missouri in a compromising position with the ALC with its two-document approach to future unity. Objections were raised not only by the sister synods of the Synodical Conference but also by voices from within Missouri itself.

There were also Missouri people who thought the union movement was not going along fast enough. These concerned men met on occasion for "round-table" discussions to discuss the "problem" of the way Missouri was dragging its confessional feet.² In 1945 Rev. E. J. Friedrich of Wheat Ridge, Colorado, the president of the Colorado District, called for another conference of these concerned men to meet in Chicago. The stated purpose of the meeting was to discuss "a strange and pernicious spirit, utterly at variance with the fundamental concepts of the Gospel and the genius of the Lutheran Church, (which) has lifted its ugly head in more than one area of our beloved Synod. This spirit has its origin in a wrong approach to the Holy Scriptures and in a tragic misconception of the very essence of the Gospel and the nature, functions and mission of the Church. It is characterized by barren, negative attitudes, unevangelical techniques in dealing with the problems of the individual and the church, unsympathetic legalistic practices, a self-complacent and separatistic narrowness, and an utter disregard for the fundamental law of Christian love."³ The meeting was held on September 6 and 7, 1945, at the Stevens Hotel in Chicago, with about forty-four prominent pastors

²"Foreword," Speaking the Truth in Love, (Chicago: The Willow Press, 1946) p 3.

³Quoted in the "Accompanying Letter" which was sent out with "A Statement" to all Missouri Synod clergymen. The text of this letter is reproduced in the Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly (*Theologische Quartalschrift*) 43,1 (January 1946), pp 56-60.

and professors present,⁴ including four district presidents and five members of the St. Louis seminary faculty, which also included the chief editor of the Concordia Theological Monthly, and the Lutheran Witness. At this meeting four essays were read, presenting issues basic to the cause espoused by its members. The result of the meeting was that "A Statement" was drawn up and a "Continuation Committee" was arranged for and entrusted with carrying on the cause of the Forty-four as it was expressed in "A Statement."

"A Statement" consisted of twelve theses or affirmations which were followed by nine statements in which the Signers deplored certain tendencies and trends within Synod.⁵ Some of the individual theses, such as the first three, if viewed by themselves, have unquestionable merit and timeliness. Other theses, however, attacked and condemned the scriptural doctrine of the church and church fellowship. We quote Thesis Five:

We affirm our conviction that sound exegetical procedure is the basis for sound Lutheran theology.

We therefore deplore the fact that Romans 16:17,18 has been applied to all Christians who differ from us in certain points of doctrine. It is our conviction, based on sound exegetical and hermeneutical principles, that this text does not apply to the present situation in the Lutheran Church of America.

We furthermore deplore the misuse of First Thessalonians 5:22 in the translation "avoid every appearance of evil." This text should be used only in its true meaning, "avoid evil in every form."

⁴There is some confusion over the number of men who were actually present at the Chicago meeting. Thomas Coates, one of the Signers, has clarified this for us: "The group is usually referred to as the Forty-four. Dr. Friedrich's circular letter to the clergy of the Synod, dated 20 September, 1945, refers to 41 men as being present at the meetings. The actual number was 42. One of these, however, a Synodical vice-president who signed the Statement in Chicago, withdrew his signature by telegram after arriving home (presumably after having some second thoughts). Three others who had planned to attend were unavoidably detained. As soon as they were given copies of the Statement they affixed their signatures. This raised the total number of original signers to the 'celebrated' Forty-four." Thomas Coates, "'A Statement'--Some Reminiscences," Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly XLIII, 4 (November 1970), p 160.

⁵Cf. Appendix One for a copy of "A Statement" and a list of the "Forty-four" who attached their signatures to the document.

Thesis Nine:

We believe that the term "unionism" should be applied only to acts in which a clear and unmistakable denial of Scriptural truth or approval of error is involved.

We therefore deplore the tendency to apply this non-Biblical term to any and every contact between Christians of different denominations.

Thesis Eight:

We affirm our conviction that any two or more Christians may pray together to the Triune God in the name of Jesus Christ if the purpose for which they meet and pray is right according to the Word of God. This obviously includes meetings of groups called for the purpose of discussing doctrinal differences.

We therefore deplore the tendency to decide the question of prayer fellowship on any other basis beyond the clear words of Scripture.

Thesis Eleven:

We affirm our conviction that in keeping with the historic Lutheran tradition and in harmony with the Synodical resolution adopted in 1938 regarding Church fellowship, such fellowship is possible without complete agreement in details of doctrine and practice which have never been considered divisive in the Lutheran Church.

Thesis Five advocates an interpretation of Romans 16:17,18 which does not permit this passage to be applied to all persistent errorists and it does so by arguing from grammatical principles which are not universal.⁶ Thesis Nine espouses an unscriptural position regarding unionism that makes church fellowship possible with persistent errorists. Thesis Eight advocates the impossible and scripturally untenable distinction between joint-prayer and prayer fellowship. These theses were an outright attack on Missouri's doctrine of fellowship as it was confessed in its "Brief Statement" of 1932.

President John W. Behnken received a copy of "A Statement" from E. J. Friedrich on September 19, 1945. By long-distance

⁶Cf. George Hoerber's monograph, A Grammatical Study of Romans 16,17, (Mankato: Lutheran Synod Book Co., 1947, 1963).

telephone the same day, President Behnken requested Dr. Friedrich to postpone any issuance of "A Statement" until Behnken had returned from his mission to war-torn Europe and then until the matter had been discussed. The Forty-four ignored their President and mailed "A Statement" and the companion Letter to all clergymen of Synod the very next day, September 20, 1945.⁷

While it was true that individuals among the Forty-four and others had been privately and publicly advocating the positions contained in "A Statement" for some time and were even putting them into practice on occasion, the appearance of "A Statement" hit the Synod like a bombshell. It was the first time that there was such a blantant, public attack made on the doctrine of church fellowship within the Missouri Synod by so many pastors and professors in prominent positions in Synod.

Reaction to the issuance of "A Statement" was immediate. Vigorous protests came from all areas of Synod, calling for the Signers to be disciplined and for the resignations of the professors from the synodical schools.⁸ President Behnken received between two and three hundred protesting letters from conferences and individuals which called for the President, as the constitutional head of synodical discipline, to take the proper discipline action with the Signers.⁹ In a telegram dated October 2, 1945,

⁷ Cf. "The History of 'A Statement,'" A mimeographed paper from the personal files of A. T. Kretzmann, p 2. No author or date given. Cf. also John W. Behnken, This I recall, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), p 191.

⁸ Cf. Paul H. Burgdorf, "The statementarian Controversy: Its Origin and History," The Confessional Lutheran VII, 3 (March 1947), p 26.

⁹ A. T. Kretzmann, "The Committee(sic) of Ten and Ten," The Lutheran Synod Quarterly 19, 4 (December 1979), p 7.

President Behnken sent to the Signers another protest for issuing the Chicago Statement.¹⁰ Equally significant were the reactions to the appearance of "A Statement" that came from the American Lutheran Church and the American Lutheran Conference. An editorial in the Lutheran Standard (ALC) said:

Knowing at least something about the mind of the American Lutheran Church, we do not hesitate to predict that this statement will at once strike a joyfully responsive chord throughout our circles. Here is indeed the voice of our brethren! Here is something to Amen!¹¹

An article in the Lutheran Outlook (A.L.Cf.) also contained a significant comment:

In view of the traditional attitude of the Missouri Synod toward such questions as prayer fellowship and unionism, the position taken by the group which met in Chicago on¹² September 6 and 7 must be regarded as well-nigh revolutionary.

The Lutheran Church historian, Theodore Aaberg, summarizes the significance of the appearance of "A Statement" most accurately: "'A Statement' revealed that its signers had been won over to the false position of the ALC in matters pertaining to church fellowship."¹³

Of even greater significance to the story of "A Statement" is the way the Statementarian Controversy would be dealt with, or, perhaps more accurately, not dealt with. It is to that part of the story which we now turn.

¹⁰The telegram is quoted by A. T. Kretzmann, ibid., p 13.

¹¹Quoted by E. Reim in "Discussion of 'A Statement,'" Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly (*Theologische Quartalschrift*) 43,1 (January 1946), p 63.

¹²ibid.

¹³Theodore Aaberg, A City Set on a Hill (Mankato: Board of Publications, Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 1968), p 190.

The Synod Praesidium arranged with the Signers' Continuation Committee to have a meeting between the Praesidium and the College of District Presidents and the full number of the Forty-four "for the purpose of providing an opportunity for a frank and brotherly discussion of the Statement and its real and imaginary implications."¹⁴ These arrangements were not completed until the Continuation Committee had first safe-guarded its position by binding the Praesidium to the agreement that "this meeting is not to be in the form of a judicial procedure against the Signers of the Statement."¹⁵ The meeting took place in St. Louis on February 14 and 15, 1946.

A week later an article in the Lutheran Witness reported the outcome of that meeting:

The greater part of the first day was spent in hearing papers written by signers of A Statement, explaining in detail the various points in that document. They did not retract the Statement, nor were they asked to do so.¹⁶ On the morning of the second day a set of resolutions was submitted by the subscribers of A Statement which later were unanimously adopted in the following wording:

I. Whereas, The Lord of the Church has blessed us with the pure Word of God and His Holy Sacraments, and

Whereas, We are today confronted with opportunities such as have perhaps never challenged our beloved Church before, and

Whereas, The Church, to meet in fullest measure the spiritual needs of men in our day should go forward united in the bond of faith and peace, therefore be it

Resolved, That we request the President of Synod to encourage our pastors and congregations to study the following important topics, to wit: 1. The principle of Sola Scriptura and legalism. 2. Unionism and separatism. 3. The principle of love in the life and work of the Church. 4. Romans 16:16-18. 5. Prayer fellowship. 6. The question: What is divisive of church fellowship?

¹⁴Quoted by Paul H. Burgdorf, op. cit., p 26.

¹⁵ibid.

¹⁶A. T. Kretzmann refers to a personal letter received from President Behnken, dated April 30, 1946, in which Behnken states that at the February 14 and 15 meeting a member of the Praesidium at least twice asked the Signers to withdraw or at least suspend "A Statement." op. cit., p 15.

II. That the President of Synod be asked to request ten men from various areas of Synod to meet with a like number of men from those who signed A Statement to the end that by divine grace, unity of doctrine and practice be promoted among us.

The above factual report is published by resolution of the meeting.¹⁷

The papers which were read by the Statementarians at the joint meeting in St. Louis were later published together with "A Statement" and an accompanying Foreward in a booklet with the title "Speaking the Truth in Love: Essays related to A Statement, Chicago, Nineteen forty-five."

There are at least two significant points to emphasize concerning that February 14 and 15 meeting which were to have far-reaching consequences in any future procedural handling of the controversy. Right from the outset the Signers acted boldly, demanding that their position be regarded as the truth, that it be sanctioned as the truly Evangelical Lutheran biblical position. President Behnken and the Praesidium placed themselves into a compromising position as soon as they agreed that their joint meeting with the Forty-four would be nor part of any discipline procedure. The outcome of the February meeting also had significant and far-reaching consequences. It was not the Praesidium which made the proposal to handle the Statementarian issue by having two representative committees discuss the issues and, in that way, resolve the issues. That is how the Signers wanted the matter handled and it is obvious that they knew what they would stand to gain for their cause in having their proposal accepted. It would further place the Praesidium into a compromising position, forestalling any actual doctrinal discipline from

¹⁷ "Presidents Meet at St. Louis," The Lutheran Witness LXV,5 (February 26, 1946), p 72.

being initiated. It would also give the Signers the needed time to make more propaganda for their cause and to gain more supporters.¹⁸

It had been agreed upon by the Praesidium and the Signers that each representative committee should consist of ten men. The Statementarians' committee consisted of H. Bartels, E. J. Friedrich, O. A. Geisemann, Theo. Graebner, B. Hemmeter, Oswald Hoffmann, O. P. Kretzmann, Geo. Kuechle, F. W. Loose, W. G. Polach and the following alternates: Aug. Bernthal, A. R. Kretzmann and Theo. Schroedel. The President's Committee of Ten consisted of G. C. Barth, P. F. Bente, J. F. Boerger, C. A. Hardt, A. T. Kretzmann, Th. Laetsch, W. H. McLaughlin, H. W. Romoser, G. H. Steffen, G. Viehweg and alternates: W. H. Bewie, E. F. Brand and W. F. Rolf. These men were chosen by President Behnken on the basis of the letters of protest which he had received when "A Statement" was first issued. In his letter requesting the men to serve on the Committee, President Behnken had stated: "'A Statement' definitely must be studied in the light of God's Word and then proper action must be taken."¹⁹

The President's Committee of Ten met with President Behnken and two Vice Presidents on April 23 and 24, 1946. The Committee drew up a list of thirteen declarations which expressed the Committee's objections to "A Statement" and the way to approach and treat the subject matter with the Signers' Committee of Ten.²⁰

¹⁸In a letter to the Signers, dated April 26, 1946, the Chairman of the Continuation Committee stated: "To date we have received only forty-seven additional signatures to the Statement." He then called on the Signers "to get busy... Our cause would be greatly benefited by a large number of signers." Quoted by Paul H. Burgdorf, op. cit., p 27.

¹⁹Letter from J. W. Behnken to A. T. Kretzmann, dated March 12, 1946.

²⁰The "Thirteen Declarations" are found in "The History of 'A Statement,'" pp 3-9.

Some of the members of the President's Committee asked for the President's assurance of what he had promised in his letter to them that "the proper action must be taken." Behnken assured them that the committee was "advisory to him as President of Synod and that the committee of ten appointed by the Signers of "A Statement" could not represent him in any way." Behnken also showed to the Committee his copy of "A Statement," which was filled with red pencil markings. He stated that each red mark indicated what he believed was false doctrine in "A Statement."²¹ Behnken also assured his appointees that the reason for this procedure was that a preliminary study of the pertinent Scripture passages was necessary.²²

The Committees of Ten and Ten met in Chicago in full day sessions on August 13-16, September 23-25 and November 12-13, 1946. Most of the time of the meetings was spent on Declaration II of the thirteen Declarations, which dealt with Thesis Five of "A Statement." The essential part of Declaration II reads:

Whereas the declaration of Thesis 5 advocates an interpretation of Romans 16:17 which does not permit the passage to be applied to all persistent teachers and supporters of error, and whereas he who advocates a change from the status quo has the burden of proof, and whereas the exegesis of Romans 16:17 presented in "Speaking the Truth in Love," as a defense of Thesis 5 is untenable, since it contains the following critical errors:

- a. it argues from grammatical principles which are admittedly not universal;
- b. it ignores the fact that verse 18, being adverbial and not adjectival, gives God's reasons for the command in verse 17;
- c. it blandly disregards what is admittedly contrary evidence ("The actions of these men are in direct contradiction to the teachings which the Romans had learned." Which teachings? The whole body of Christian doctrine? Probably. It should be mentioned that the "probably" was changed to "certainly" in the November meeting.)

²¹ A. T. Kretzmann, op. cit., p 14.

²² A. T. Kretzmann, Personal Interview, April 2, 1981.

Therefore we declare:

1. that verse 18 may not be construed as a modifier of tous poiountas;
2. that it may not be explained as a limitation or a characterization or a description by which we are to recognize tous poiountas and whereas teen didacheen in Romans 16:17 designates the entire corpus doctrinae Christianae (the body of Christian doctrine) and not merely the part that urges maintaining of peace; therefore we declare that the passage~~s~~ is applicable to any and all who persistently teach contrary to apostolic doctrine and not merely to such as teach faith-subverting errors.²³

This Declaration on Romans 16:17 remained the main topic of discussion throughout the meetings. No agreement on this passage was ever reached between the two Committees. The Signers also maintained that what they were advocating was not a different doctrine of fellowship, but only a different exegesis, and therefore it was nothing divisive of fellowship. The President's Committee maintained that what "A Statement" said regarding Romans 16:17 made it doctrinally divisive because by their false exegesis the Statementarians were propounding an unscriptural doctrine. We do well to note some of the remarks on this issue which were drawn up by the President's Committee in its "Report" to President Behnken after the third joint meeting of the Ten and Ten:

Any false doctrine or any explaining away or nullification of a Scripture doctrine or fact resulting from a certain exegesis of a Scripture passage is potentially divisive of church fellowship. If, in spite of due admonition, such false doctrine is propagated it becomes divisive also in practise...

To claim that exegesis never divides is to claim too much, since at times it may not be possible to tell where exegesis leaves off and false doctrine begins. No one, for example, could tolerate from his pulpit the Reformed exegesis of "This is My body," even though the speaker professed the doctrine of the real presence. In this connection the example of the theologian Kahnis was cited, who did just that. The propagation of such exegesis disturbs the peace of the Church, makes divisions, and therefore comes under verse 17 (of Romans 16).²⁴

²³ A. T. Kretzmann, "The Committees of Ten and Ten," op. cit., p 18,19.

²⁴ "Report on the Meetings of Ten and Ten," drawn up by the President's Committee in Fort Wayne, Indiana, December 10, 1946, and addressed to President Behnken, p 12.

For the record we also quote the recommendation of the President's Committee which it made at the conclusion of the meetings as to what action the President should take:

We recommend that the Præsidium urge all Signers by the mercies of Christ and by the glorious history of our Synod, which glory consists in its confessional fidelity,

To retract the charges made in the accompanying letter,

To withdraw Speaking the Truth in Love from circulation,

Not to propagate the exegesis which identifies the poiountas of verse 17 from verse 18,

Especially not to propagate the application they have made,

Not to practise this application themselves,

To adhere wholeheartedly and unreservedly to Synod's Scriptural position on church fellowship and unionism set forth in the Brief Statement.²⁵

President Behnken ignored the report and recommendation of his Committee. He also ignored his Committee's request to publish their "Report" because by this time he had had his own private meetings with the Signers and had made an "agreement" with them. That "agreement," reached January 6, 1947, was an agreement between the Praesidium, the Continuation Committee, four Signers from the St. Louis faculty and Dr. Lawrence Meyer. The agreement was that "A Statement" (and its accompanying letter) was to be withdrawn as a basis of discussion, although this was not to be interpreted as a retraction. There were five other specific points of agreement:

1. The Signers will no longer exist or function as a group;
2. the Continuation Committee will be disbanded;
3. "A Statement" as such will no longer be promoted by us (the Signers);
4. nothing will be done to push the sale of Speaking the Truth in Love and
5. If any individual or group among the Signers of the "Statement" is attacked on account of evangelical practice, we expect the officers of Synod to come to the defense of the brother or the brethren under attack.²⁶

²⁵Letter addressed to J. W. Behnken from the President's Appointees on "A Statement," dated December 10, 1946.

²⁶Quoted by Richard R. Caemmerer Sr., "Recollections of 'A Statement,'" Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly XLIII, 4 (November 1970), pp 157, 158.

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In a letter, dated January 18, 1947, President Behnken notified the members of Synod of his "agreement" with the Statementarians, that "A Statement" had been withdraw as a basis of discussion but that this was not to be interpreted as a retraction. Behnken went on in his letter to assure his Synod that this did mean "that the issues involved shall now be glossed over or ignored." Behnken also stated that "the brethren (the Statementarians) assured us repeatedly that 'A Statement' was not intended to have anything whatsoever to do with the questions of 'Lutheran Union' and 'Selective Fellowship.'" ²⁷ The letter then states the first four points of the "agreement" made with the Signers, as quoted above. The notorious fifth point of agreement was not included in Behnken's letter.

After Behnken had announced the "agreement," his Committee requested to meet with him to protest his compromising "solution." Behnken replied that he would assume full responsibility for any harmful results which would stem from the "agreement" and then he "very curtly and sharply dismissed his committee members." ²⁸

Behnken's "solution" to the problem was no solution at all. "A Statement" flew right into the face of the Scripture doctrine of church fellowship, as Behnken himself knew, or at least had stated to his Committee. His solution of withdraw from discussion but not retract was a unionistic compromise. It was the solution of trying to sweep the dirt and filth under the rug and pretend it had somehow gone away. But the Statementarians did

²⁷ Behnken's January 18, 1947 letter is reproduced in the Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly XLIII, 4 (November 1970), pp 182-184.

²⁸ A. T. Kretzmann, "The Committees of Ten and Ten," The Lutheran Synod Quarterly 20, 3 (September 1980), p 50.

not go away. They had won their battle. According to their agreement they and their "evangelical practices" would now even be protected by synodical officialdom. The false unionism position and its adherents were in Missouri to stay. Any dam that had been in the way to hold back not only the unionism movement, but all other kinds of false doctrine, had been broken down by the State-mentarians so that soon they could overwhelm the Synod. All that there was left to do was to have Behnken's "agreement" officially ratified by the Synod. That was done the same year at the Centennial Anniversary Convention, held July 20-29, 1947.

The matter of "A Statement" and the way it had been dealt with came up at Missouri's Centennial Convention. A memorial submitted by most of the men who had made up the President's Committee of Ten called for disciplinary action to be taken.²⁹ The issue was hotly debated in the meetings of the floor Committee on Doctrinal Matters during the convention. But when the floor committee's resolution that in substance called for the issues raised by "A Statement" to not be dealt~~h~~ with but that "the President continue to submit to pastors and congregations material for the Scriptural study of the questions at issue,"³⁰ the motion passed overwhelmingly. The rationalization used was that since "A Statement" had been withdrawn from discussion, any action on the matter was irrelevant.

When that resolution passed at its Centennial Convention the Missouri Synod officially became a pluralistic church body.

²⁹Proceedings of the Fortieth Regular Convention of the Ev. Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States, Chicago, Illinois, July 20-29, 1947, pp 520-522.

³⁰Missouri Proceedings, 1947, p 523.

Two different, antithetic doctrines of church fellowship were allowed publicly and officially to stand side by side. False doctrine was for the first time in Missouri's history granted official toleration. The dam had broken. The scriptural position of church fellowship was no longer a matter of confession and conscience but only a preferred position. It was preferred as long as those who preferred it were in the majority. Soon they would be only a minority and the position of the errorists would be in the majority. Thomas Coates, one of the original signers of "A Statement," in reflecting on "A Statement" twenty-five years after its appearance could correctly say:

It is a matter of immense gratification to realize that the theology of the Statement has come to be recognized as the theology of the Synod itself; that issues raised by the Statement have been settled in favor of the evangelical position which it espoused; and that "A Statement" is no longer a controversial document (except, perhaps, among a dwindling minority of "die-hards"). Yesterday's "heresy" has become today's "orthodoxy."³¹

Coates' statement became true in 1960 when the Missouri Synod came out with its "Theology of Fellowship."

One of the most difficult parts of this story concerning "A Statement" of the Forty-four to explain and understand is the role that John W. Behnken played. On the one hand, it seems that from what Behnken said and indicated, at least to those men who had protested "A Statement," he believed that it was a document which contained false doctrine. Almost all of his actions betray at best an inconsistency with his stated convictions. How is one to explain his actions, his departure from established constitutional procedure in the way he dealt with the Statemen-

³¹Thomas Coates, op. cit., p 163.

tarians? When these questions are put to the men who knew Behnken personally and were involved in the Missouri controversy, the first answer usually received is: "his heart was in the right place." All indications seem to bear this out that Behnken wanted the controversy to be resolved on the basis of God's Word and in a God-pleasing way. But what about his inconsistencies in the way he acted? Several answers are given to that question. A. T. Kretzmann states that when the President's appointees met with Behnken in the April 23 and 24, 1946 meeting, Behnken said repeatedly that his main concern was that he not be the President of Synod when it breaks up.³² Others point to Behnken's fear of any "bad press" for the Missouri Synod which might come out of disciplining prominent members of Synod. He is reported to have said that the last thing he wanted was a "heresy trial" in the Missouri Synod.³³ The question of Behnken's motives is a difficult one to answer. Certainly there must have been involved a naivete that thought or at least hoped that doctrinal controversies can be resolved by compromising, endless discussion, but no disciplining and correcting action.

The telling of this story would not be complete if we did not try to see what lessons can be learned for us today. With 20-20 hindsight we can see some of the procedural mistakes which were made, mistakes which Lutherans who want to retain a truly confessional position and practice will want to avoid with a passion. Certainly at the top of the list is the mistake of believing that doctrinal disputes are solved by making such

³²A. T. Kretzmann, Personal Interview, op. cit.

³³S. W. Becker, Personal Interview at his home, April 3, 1981.

such unionistic compromises as agreeing to withdraw but not retract. Another facet of unionistic compromise is to make doctrinal discussion with erring brother an end in and of itself. A truly God-pleasing procedure calls for discussion for the purpose of first of all being sure that the erring brother is being properly understood. But discussion must always be seen from the perspective of rebuking and correcting the erring brother in love. If he refuses to heed the admonition of his brethren, then he must be separated or suspended. If discussion serves only as a forum of debate between two preferred positions, the errorist will become more entrenched in his error and gain more time for making further propaganda for his cause. Discussion must be seen from the perspective that the discussion is part of the discipline procedure and the proper scriptural course of action will be taken and followed through.³⁴

³⁴ A concern must be raised here about our own day and the situations in which we find ourselves applying doctrinal discipline. We must seriously ask ourselves, when, for instance, a professor of religion in a synodical worker-training school writes a public paper that contains false doctrine and, on the one hand, the professor is admonished in love and the matter is earnestly discussed with him with the hope of correcting him in love, but, on the other hand, the professor is allowed to continue teaching in the classroom without any retraction being made of the false doctrine, then we must ask ourselves if a confessional compromise has not already been made or, at least, that we have placed ourselves in a compromising position.

Admittedly, human judgment plays into such situations. We must not only ask ourselves, when does patience become nothing more than toleration? But also, when is patience perceived as being toleration? Some people may think that suspending such a professor from his teaching responsibilities, with pay, until the matter is completely resolved may be a bit too harsh, presumptuous or reactionary. Nevertheless, when the impression is given that our words are coming out of one side of our mouth, but our action or lack of action bespeaks something else coming out of the other side of our mouth, then we have compromised our confession and rendered ineffectual any loving admonition which we have to offer the erring brother. We owe more than that to any erring brother.

To brush the matter aside by saying, "You have to remember, that is just the way that man is" is dangerous, places the entire Church in a precarious position and certainly does not resolve the problem. Every errorist in the

The story of "A Statement" of the Forty-four as part of the larger chapter on Missouri's confessional breakdown also demonstrates the relationship between the vital and crucial interlocking issues of the authority of Scripture (sola Scriptura) and the scriptural position and practice of church fellowship. That the one will never stand for long when the other is weakened is certainly demonstrated by this sad story. Some well-meaning people in Missouri honestly thought that by loosening their church fellowship practices it would give them the opportunity to testify to and help the cause of the Gospel and confessional Lutheranism. But by weakening its fellowship posture, Missouri was denying the authority of Scripture, the very essence of the formal principle of confessional Lutheranism. It was only a matter of a few years and the precious truths right at the heart and core of the Gospel itself were being attacked and denied. By that time there was nothing that could be done to stop it because the sola Scriptura position of church fellowship had gone by the wayside. The dam had broken.

history of the church can be characterized as "that is just the way he was."

The use of questionable, suspicious sounding terminology in public papers, even if it is used under the protest that the "right thing" was meant by it, cannot be tolerated in the Church because of the offense it causes or even may possibly cause. One of the conditions of being "apt to teach" especially on the part of those men who are entrusted with the responsibility of worker-training, is that they hold fast and employ only "the form of sound words" in their teaching and writing.

In dealing with an erring brother we will certainly strive to avoid "making church history." But if that is our over-riding concern then we would be committing the same tragic mistake which John W. Behnken committed. Behnken realized his mistake--but only after it was too late.

In such difficult matters we need to humbly implore the Lord of the Church for a rich measure of His Spirit, for an unwavering love for the Truth and for a loving concern for our Christian brethren. We also need to heed the admonition of St. Paul to us both as individuals and as a church body: "Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall."

We said at the beginning of this story that it was one of the bad stories in the history of Lutheranism in America. The question does arise if there was a good side to this bad story. The answer to that we know, by faith, is an unqualified "yes." The Lord of the Church always is working and accomplishing his good and saving purpose, even on the dark pages of church history. This story is no exception. Again, with historical hindsight, we are allowed to see some of the good which the Lord accomplished. During those dark days the Lord of the Church led faithful pastors, professors, teachers, and laymen deep into the Scriptures to equip and strengthen them for his purpose of giving faithful testimony to the Truth. This was often done at great personal sacrifice and in the face of humanly insurmountable, overwhelming opposition and criticism. The Lord also led those heroes of faith to take the proper confessional action when it was called for. The details of their confessional action belong to another story.

APPENDIX ONE

✠ In Nomine Jesu ✠



A STATEMENT



We, the undersigned, as individuals, members of Synod, conscious of our responsibilities and duties before the Lord of the Church, herewith subscribe to the following statement:

ONE

We affirm our unswerving loyalty to the great evangelical heritage of historic Lutheranism. We believe in its message and mission for this crucial hour in the time of man.

We therefore deplore any and every tendency which would limit the power of our heritage, reduce it to narrow legalism, and confine it by man-made traditions.

TWO

We affirm our faith in the great Lutheran principle of the inerrancy, certainty, and all-sufficiency of Holy Writ.

We therefore deplore a tendency in our Synod to substitute human judgments, synodical resolutions, or other sources of authority for the supreme authority of Scripture.

THREE

We affirm our conviction that the Gospel must be given free course so that it may be preached in all its truth and power to all the nations of the earth.

We therefore deplore all man-made walls and barriers and all ecclesiastical traditions which would hinder the free course of the Gospel in the world.

FOUR

We believe that the ultimate and basic motive for all our life and work must be love—love of God, love of the Word, love of the brethren, love of souls.

We affirm our conviction that the law of love must also find application to our relationship to other Lutheran bodies.

We therefore deplore a loveless attitude which is manifesting itself within Synod. This unscriptural attitude has been expressed in suspicions of brethren, in the impugning of motives, and in the condemnation of all who have expressed differing opinions concerning some of the problems confronting our Church today.

FIVE

We affirm our conviction that sound exegetical procedure is the basis for sound Lutheran theology.

We therefore deplore the fact that Romans 16:17,18 has been applied to all Christians who differ from us in certain points of doctrine. It is our conviction, based on sound exegetical and hermeneutical principles, that this text does not apply to the present situation in the Lutheran Church of America.

We furthermore deplore the misuse of First Thessalonians 5:22 in the translation "avoid every appearance of evil." This text should be used only in its true meaning, "avoid evil in every form."

SIX

We affirm the historic Lutheran position concerning the central importance of the una sancta and the local congregation. We believe that there should be a re-emphasis of the privileges and responsibilities of the local congregation also in the matter of determining questions of fellowship.

We therefore deplore the new and improper emphasis on the synodical organization as basic in our consideration of the problems of the Church. We believe that no organizational loyalty can take the place of loyalty to Christ and His Church.

SEVEN

We affirm our abiding faith in the historic Lutheran position concerning the centrality of the Atonement and the Gospel as the revelation of God's redeeming love in Christ.

We therefore deplore any tendency which reduces the warmth and power of the Gospel to a set of intellectual propositions which are to be grasped solely by the mind of man.

EIGHT

We affirm our conviction that any two or more Christians may pray together to the Triune God in the name of Jesus Christ if the purpose for which they meet and pray is right according to the Word of God. This obviously includes meetings of groups called for the purpose of discussing doctrinal differences.

We therefore deplore the tendency to decide the question of prayer fellowship on any other basis beyond the clear words of Scripture.

NINE

We believe that the term "unionism" should be applied only to acts in which a clear and unmistakable denial of Scriptural truth or approval of error is involved.

We therefore deplore the tendency to apply this non-Biblical term to any and every contact between Christians of different denominations.

TEN

We affirm the historic Lutheran position that no Christian has a right to take offense at anything which God has commanded in His Holy Word. The plea of offense must not be made a cover for the irresponsible expression of prejudices, traditions, customs, and usages.

ELEVEN

We affirm our conviction that in keeping with the historic Lutheran tradition and in harmony with the Synodical resolution adopted in 1938 regarding Church fellowship, such fellowship is possible without complete agreement in details of doctrine and practice which have never been considered divisive in the Lutheran Church.

TWELVE

We affirm our conviction that our Lord has richly, singularly, and undeservedly blessed our beloved Synod during the first century of its existence in America. We pledge the efforts of our hearts and hands to the building of Synod as the second century opens and new opportunities are given us by the Lord of the Church.

✠ SOLI DEO GLORIA ✠

In Witness Whereof, we, the undersigned, affix our signatures this seventh day of September in the year of our Lord 1945, at Chicago, Illinois.

✠

ACKER, LAWRENCE
AMLING, C. M.
ARNDT, W.
BARTELS, H.
BAUER, W. E.
BEHNKE, C. A.
BERNTHAL, AUG. F.
BOBZIN, AUG. F.
BRETSCHER, PAUL
BRUENING, WM. F.
BRUSTAT, A. W.
CAEMMERER, RICH. R.
COATES, THOMAS
DEFFNER, L. H.
ENGELBRECHT, H. H.
FRIEDRICH, E. J.
GEISEMAN, O. A.
GIESELER, C. A.
GLABE, E. B.
GRAEBNER, THEO.
HANSER, ARTHUR R.
HEMMETER, BERNARD H.

HEMMETER, H. B.
HILLMER, WM. H.
HOFFMANN, OSWALD
KRETZMANN, A. R.
KRETZMANN, KARL
KRETZMANN, O. P.
KUECHLE, GEO.
KUNTZ, WERNER
KURTH, ERWIN
KUMNICK, H. H.
LINDEMANN, FRED H.
LINDEMANN, HERBERT
LOOSE, F. W.
MEYER, ADOLF F.
MILLER, PAUL F.
POLACK, W. G.
SAUER, O. A.
SCHROEDEL, THEO. H.
THEISS, O. H.
WEBER, EDMUND W.
WENCHEL, J. FREDERIC
WIND, H. F.

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